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President Shelly meets with Mayor Berry

Leaders discuss homelessness in Albuquerque and forming new task force



Albuquerque Mayor Berry listens to Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly on concerns from the Nation on the recent murders of two Navajo men who were homeless. The two leaders are partnering to form a new task force to prevent violence against the homeless. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

ALBUQUERQUE—The recent murders of two homeless Navajos has united a city and tribal nation against further attacks.

Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly met with Albuquerque Mayor Richard Berry on July 24 to discuss details of the murders and work together to prevent further violence from happening.

"We've come here to create a partnership and collaboration on how we can work together,"

President Shelly said.

Joining him were tribal representatives from the Division of Social Services, Division of Public Safety, Division of Health, Office of the Speaker, and the Human Rights Commission.

The president said similar attacks prompted partnerships with Gallup, Farmington and Bloomfield.

"We need to prevent this happening again and we all need to work together," President

Shelly said. "Life is precious."

Mayor Richard Berry agreed with President Shelly and said the incident was "a senseless act." He noted that in 2012, the city collaborated with Harvard University on a study of Native American homelessness.

"This was a senseless act. It was something that really wakes up an entire community to the plight of the homeless and also to our friends in the Native American community,"

Berry said.

He said that the city of Albuquerque would work with President Shelly to craft an agreement to address the issue. More meetings need to be scheduled, Berry said, for development of an action plan.

Turning to President Shelly, Berry said, "Between the two of us, if we can use our collective powers of impact to let our congressional delegations, our legislators, and cities to get

resources and identify gaps in services to try and get that in place, I think that's really going to be the key."

Leonard Gorman, director of the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission, said public hearings were held in border towns, including Albuquerque, between 2008 and 2009.

He said they engaged the Albuquerque Human Rights Office and that after a successful opening dialogue, the discussions and communications trailed off.

"At that time, Mayor Chavez was in office and we were dealing with his cohorts in crafting an agreement," Gorman said.

He noted that the human rights of Navajo people needed to be

commission to deal with Native American concerns; and to allow the NNHRC to setup interviews with the city councilors.

After the hour-long meeting concluded, President Shelly traveled to the Albuquerque Indian Center to break bread and eat with a roomful of natives from different tribes that came to the center for a soup lunch.

"I grew up in hard conditions, similar to yours," President Shelly told the youth in the group. "But look at where I am today.

"If I can do it, so can you," he added.

President Shelly said each individual has a choice, much like opening a door. If you do nothing about it, the door remains



Mayor Berry and President Shelly spoke after the meeting about what they expect from the partnership and the proposed task force. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

"We expect the perpetrators to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law."

acknowledged, in addition to cultural sensitivity.

"We need to have an understanding of the cultural relationships we have as human beings, or as president said, as five fingered individuals," Gorman said.

Dr. Jennifer Denetdale, a member of the NNHRC, shared several points with the group.

Her first point was exacting.

"We expect the perpetrators to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law," Denetdale said.

She added that the commission did not want any plea bargains and that an investigation needed to happen on whether or not the incident was a hate crime.

Her remaining six points were to investigate the crime and establish a task force; allow the NNHRC to participate in the decision making process; have the city of Albuquerque provide the resources for the task force; for Mayor Berry to publicly acknowledge Albuquerque is dangerous for homeless people, especially natives; formation of a

closed. To exit the challenges of living on the street, one must open the door and begin making decisions to turn their life around.

The Albuquerque Indian Center submitted a budget to the Navajo Nation for supplemental appropriations amounting to \$38,000. The bulk of those funds are used for services like the lunch that was provided to the homeless and indigent natives in need of services.

President Shelly will meet with Mayor Berry again next week to begin forming the task force and creation of an action plan.

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President Shelly visited the Albuquerque Indian Center after the meeting with Mayor Berry and had lunch with the clients of the center, many of which were homeless. He said he grew up in similar circumstances and made it to where he is today by self-reliance and proper decision making. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



The Albuquerque Indian Center sees a large number of native clients from various tribes that are homeless. The center provides food and services to the indigent population, including the two deceased men. (Photo by Rick Abasta)